



## Social comparison motivation of mothers' with their adolescent daughters and its effects on the mother's consumption behaviour

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 26 June 2012

Received in revised form

12 September 2012

Accepted 4 October 2012

Available online 6 November 2012

#### Keywords:

Social comparison

Identity

Mothers

Adolescent daughter

Clothing consumption practices

### ABSTRACT

Whereas prior research has focused on consumer socialisation and intergenerational influence theories to study mother–daughter interactions, this research draws on identity to emphasise the association between mothers' social comparison and their related clothing consumption behaviors in the presence of adolescent daughters. A survey of 423 adolescent daughters' mothers shows how personal and relational identities combine to favor mothers' social comparison process with their adolescent daughter and explain a set of consumption behaviors, including co-consumption practices (common shopping, joint purchases, clothing exchanges) and mothers' changes in brands, stores and styles. In order to better target adolescent girls' mothers, retailers could develop more inter-generational practices.

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### 1. Introduction

Women and their adolescent daughters are the major spenders of discretionary income on clothing items. Their average annual expenditure on clothing alone is over €800 in an attempt to project a youthful image (Le Figaro, 2011). Researchers (Ruvio et al., 2012) and retailers (New York Times, 2011) have noted this pursuit of a youthful look and the important role of adolescent daughters in constructing such an image. From a theoretical perspective, why do mothers engage in these clothing co-consumption practices with their adolescent daughter? Insights into the motives that drive mothers to adopt co-consumption practices with their adolescent daughter can provide retailers with a set of cues they might use to engage with this attractive segment more effectively.

Previous existing theories on consumer socialization and intergenerational influence fall short of answering this question. These studies highlighted the role of mothers as socializing agents for their adolescents in the consumption domain (Carlson et al., 1990). Nevertheless, recent research has shown that adolescent daughters can also exert an influence on their mothers' consumption practices, such as purchases of fashion items or everyday shopping (Gavish et al., 2010; Ruvio et al., 2012). Our study takes

a closer look at the influence of adolescent daughters on their mothers' consumption behavior by focusing on the mothers' point of view. We take a social comparison approach in order to investigate the motivation behind the mothers' tendencies to engage in consumption practices with their adolescent daughters. Social comparison has been an important concept in the study of how consumers compare themselves to a desirable standard and formulate a self-evaluation (Wills and Sulz, 1991). Originally proposed by Festinger (1954), this literature suggests that social comparison occurs when the other person is constructed as part of the self (Gardner et al., 2002). Given that adolescent daughters are considered the most immediate layer of their mothers' extended self (Kimura and Sakashita, 2010), they may be significant comparison targets for mothers. Whereas extant studies focus on social comparisons with vicarious role models (Martin and Gentry, 1997; Richins, 1991) or with direct models during adolescence (Chan, 2008), surprisingly little attention has been devoted to mothers' social comparison with their adolescent daughters. Our basic premise is that mothers' evaluations of retailing are an output of a social comparison process with co-oriented adolescent daughters. Specifically, we propose that shopping with adolescent daughters provides mothers with information and normative standards by which mothers may evaluate retailing phenomena. This social comparison process with the adolescent daughter, then, shapes the construction of retailing attitudes and behaviors.

Of all the transitions that occur in life, a daughter entering adolescence is a significant event in a mother's life. For the

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mother, the daughter's adolescent years represent a period of ambiguity and uncertainty, which may lead the mother to redefine her relationships (shared identity) and, as a result, redefine her own personal identity (Decoopman et al., 2010). This study examines how two variables associated with the development of personal and relational identities – mothers' self-esteem and mothers' relational proximity to their adolescent daughters – combine to favor the process of mothers' comparing themselves socially with their adolescent daughters. In addition, these two variables may help explain the mothers' consumption practices. Given that clothing express one's self-image and relationship to others (Piacentini, 2010), this study focuses on the consumption of clothing.

This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 builds on co shopping literature and social comparison theory within the field of retailing to describe the theoretical framework and hypotheses. Sections 3 and 4 detail the method and results of a study conducted among the mothers of 423 adolescent girls to test the hypotheses. Finally, the discussion provides practical guidelines for managers who want to target their marketing toward the mothers of adolescent girls.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Shopping is a social experience

Many social aspects within the purchase environment can affect consumer behavior. Research shows that the fact that consumers see other people in the store is a cue that can shape intentions and behaviors (Borges et al., 2010). For instance, consumers prefer stores where they think they will find other consumers who are highly similar to themselves. During the shopping process, one of the main sources of influence might be the shopping companion. A shopping companion is a "person who accompanies buyers on their shopping trip in order to assist them with their on-site purchase decision" (Hartman and Kiecker, 1991, p. 462). The companion shopper is easily observable in the retail setting and might be a friend, a family member, a work colleague .... Prior research has shown that adolescents are major source of influence on parents' product choices (e.g., Ekström, 2007). In particular, the adolescent daughter may represent an ideal shopping companion for mothers. It has been shown that shopping with the adolescent daughter may help mothers evaluate products, brands, and stores in ways that helping them to construct a youthful image (Decoopman et al., 2010).

### 2.2. Social comparison with the adolescent daughter and its effects on mothers' consumption behaviors

Festinger (1954) was the first to introduce the social comparison theory, positing that in the absence of objective information about themselves, people judge themselves and evaluate their opinions and abilities on the basis of comparison with others. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory suggests that comparison occurs in face-to-face situations with others. Studies have demonstrated that significant comparisons take place when the other person is constructed as part of the self (Gardner et al., 2002). During life's transitions, individuals try to determine who they are, and what they can and cannot do. The desire to enhance their self-perception may lead individuals to activate the process of social comparison with a desirable standard (Festinger, 1954; Wills and Suls, 1991).

Researchers consider the adolescent daughter as the most immediate layer of a mother's extended self (Kimura and Sakashita, 2010). In this perspective, adolescent daughters may

serve as a mirror that mothers use to see themselves, which in turn introduces an interpersonal comparison process, consciously or not. Through this "mirror effect," (Cooley, 1902), the entry of a girl into adolescence is likely to accentuate a mother's perceptions of physical and social changes (Decoopman et al., 2010). As ideal images of femininity and youthfulness, adolescent daughters can help their mothers, who may have doubts about themselves, redefine their identity. For these reasons, adolescent daughters may be significant comparison targets or significant motivational factors for mothers (Ruvio et al., 2012).

When daughter adolescents enter into womanhood, consumption can become a bridge to connect mothers with their adolescent daughters' new stage in life. Indeed, consumption can become a vehicle for mothers and daughters to still share a part of their lives. For example, for mothers, co-consumption practices with regard to clothing such as going shopping together, joint ownership purchases, and clothing exchanges become increasingly important at this time, as a way to evaluate their own behaviors (Decoopman et al., 2010). Given that the presence of adolescent daughters helps mothers to make appropriate purchases, co-consumption practices provide a unique opportunity for mothers to make direct comparisons with their adolescent daughter.

Other studies have shown that adolescent daughters can be fashion mavens and role models for their mothers (Gavish et al., 2010; Ruvio et al., 2012) through clothing consumption practices. Adolescent daughters may initiate their mothers into this world of fashion by introducing them to new clothing stores and brands, and questioning their clothing style. Thus, we are interested in the extent to which mothers' social comparison with their adolescent daughters affects both the inclination to engage in clothing co-consumption practices with their adolescent daughters and their inclination to change their clothing styles, brands and stores in accordance with the information they receive from their adolescent daughters. As such, we posit that:

H1: Mothers' social comparison orientation is positively related to their inclination to engage in co-consumption practices with their adolescent daughters.

H2: Mothers' social comparison orientation is positively related to their inclination to change their clothing styles, brands and stores in accordance with information from their adolescent daughters.

### 2.3. Mechanisms underlying mothers' social comparison with their adolescent daughter

Little attention has been paid to the mechanisms underlying mothers' social comparison process with their adolescent daughter in order to understand better why mothers engage in co-shopping activities. This is an important void to address, because it seems that both relational and personal identities affect mothers' consumption activities with their adolescent daughters indirectly through social comparison. Savvy marketers can leverage the emergence of these identities to improve the marketing of their products.

#### 2.3.1. The entry of daughters into adolescence: Mothers' personal identity concerns

Consumer researchers have investigated events such as the transition to motherhood (Banister et al., 2010) or the transition to grand-motherhood (Bouchet, 1992) to explore how women use consumption to negotiate these transitions and reconstruct their identity. Of all the transitions that occur in life, the entry of a child into adolescence is an important event in a mother's life (Decoopman et al., 2010). Adolescence is the time when teenagers

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